

David Desmarest House
New Milford, Bergen County, New Jersey

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
District of New Jersey

Historic American Buildings Survey
Seymour Williams, A.I.A., District Officer
133 Central Avenue, Rahway, New Jersey

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2. NEMIL

DAVID DESMAREST HOUSE
or
Gurd House
Near Old French Cemetery
River Road
New Milford, Bergen County
New Jersey

Owner: Mrs. A.^LGurd. Alice Lee Gurd (Mrs John A.)

Date of Erection: About 1681.

Architect and Builder: No record.

Present Condition: Good.

Number of Stories: One and a half, and cellar.

Materials of Construction: Stone.

Other Existing Records: See text. ¹

Additional Data: See following pages.

¹ Ellis, R.C., Colonial Dutch Houses in New Jersey, p. 36.

Source of information - Bergen Evening Record, Oct. 19, 1933

At the bend in River Road near Old Bridge stands an attractive colonial house, which is closely linked historically with the French cemetery and the Samuel Demarest house near New Bridge, for this, too, is a relic of the Huguenot settlement.

About 1681 David Demarest, founder of the colony, built it for his son, David, Jr. Across the road on the site of the present Zabriskie homestead he built another for his third son, Jean. West of these on the bank of the river his own house had previously been built, and also the mill, but the home is the only one of the group to survive.

Although few houses in this vicinity antedate this old landmark, the story of its origin is not generally known. Twenty years ago the Bergen County Historical Society published a picture of it, designating it as "An early Demarest house (builder and date unknown."

"We found, however, that Miss Saretta Demarest of Teaneck, whose grandfather, Jost (George) Demarest was born in this house in 1808, was able to furnish an authentic history from its origin down to 1828, the date her grandfather left it to move into a home of his own. He lived until 1899 so Miss Demarest had an opportunity to get her information direct from one who knew the family's history.

David Jr. and his wife, Rachel Cresson, whom he had married in Flatbush in 1675, were the owners until David's death in 1691. As was customary the property then came into the possession of their eldest son, Jacobus (James), born in 1681, who married Leah DeGroot in 1707 and after her death, Margrietje Haring. Their son, Johannes (John), born in 1720, great-great-grandfather of Saretta Demarest, next inherited it. His wife was Rachel Zabriskie.

At the death of Johannes in 1783, Caspaures (Caspar), born 1766, became the owner. The latter married Rachel Vorhase in 1789, and lived until 1844. In 1828 he purchased the Brinkerhoff Manor House in Teaneck where Miss Saretta lives, for Jost, one of his younger sons.

The eldest son, Albert, remained to take full possession later of the ancestral home.

One important fact lacking in Miss Demarest's files was the year in which it passed out of the hands of the Demarest family. An interview with Miss M. Zabriskie at her home on the opposite side of the road from the house in question enabled us to complete the story to date, for it was her great-grandfather, Henry Zabriskie, who purchased it from the Demarests. She first gave us the approximate date, then went to look among some old documents and discovered that she had the deed, dated 1850, transferring the house and farm from Albert Demarest and his wife, Rachel (formerly Rachel Berdan) to Henry Zabriskie.

After the passing of Henry Zabriskie in 1861, her grandfather, John, and his wife lived here until 1890. From that date until about 1908 it was occupied by various tenants who worked on the Zabriskie farms. At one time a colored family lived in it. Then a real estate firm took it over and finally sold it to the late John A. Gurd, architect, who remodelled it somewhat, but retained its colonial charm, changing its appearance but very little. It is still the home of Mrs. Gurd.

Those who are seeking a true type of Dutch house would pass this by, for it was not developed in the usual way. Although it is built of brown sandstone, only the old kitchen reveals this fact because at sometime in its long existence the sandstone has been covered with plaster.

It has the usual gambrel roof, but has no dormer windows. In addition to its original thatched roof it has had three others. The interior is very much like other Dutch houses on the ground floor, with the wide hall extending from front to rear. There are three fireplaces, and before the later changes were made there was a Dutch oven.

For the past three-quarters of a century this has been the home of so many different families that the Demarest influence seems obscure and very difficult to call back in the imagination. And yet it was the home of an unbroken line of Demarests for 169 years. It is said that a house long occupied absorbs the vibrations of the personalities who dwell therein.

Therefore the predominating influence must have been that of this French Huguenot family that had acquired Dutch ways and married into Dutch families. An interesting & coincidence is that, with the exception of the two wives of Jacobus, every mistress of the

this house during the Demarest ownership was named Rachel.

Happiness and contentment prevailed within these walls, no doubt, for historians say the Huguenots had the art of living happily. One would expect to find here religious devotion, integrity, gentility, refinement, and thrift, inasmuch as these are virtues ascribed to the Huguenots, the rewards for which were high standing in the community, prosperity, and a happy existence. This seems to have been true of the Demarests.

Mrs. Frances Westervelt once remarked in our conversation about them, "In all my research and experience in this county's history, I have found no other family more honorable and highly respected than this one".

"As rich as a Huguenot" had become a proverb in France during the reign of Louis XIV at the time the Demarests left for Holland before coming to America. Robinson says in his History of Western Europe that, "There were perhaps a million Huguenots among fifteen million Frenchmen, and they undoubtedly formed the most thrifty and enterprising part of the nation. They were skilled in manufacture, trade, and finance." Through the error of trying to suppress Calvinism France lost such citizens as these, but her loss was Bergen County's gain.

Even in the days when American colonists usually lived a simple life in primitive surroundings there was an air of prosperity, affluence and refinement of taste about this household.

Miss Saretta Demarest owns many heirlooms from this home that confirm this assertion. There is, for instance, a pair of French tapestry panels with quaint hunting scenes, which when taken to the Metropolitan Museum for appraisal, were pronounced by experts to be early 18th century French tapestries of considerable value, and of a type that is exceedingly rare.

The Museum authorities wanted to buy them but their offer was refused because Miss Demarest believes they should remain in Bergen County to form a part of New Jersey's share of Americana. There are also fine pieces of antique French jewelry long ago worn at weddings and other society affairs in this old manor house.

It may be just a house to the average passerby, but to the writer, it is a home where there has been a "heap o' livin' ", a structure that brings to mind many fascinating pages of history, a landmark that makes one conscious of this county's remarkable background.

Source of information - a letter from Mr. Clarence H. Tabor, Jr. in charge of the Ridgewood office of the New Jersey H.A.B.S. to Mr. Seymour Williams, District Officer - dated April 4, 1934.

"Miss Saretta Demarest is a direct descendant of David DesMarest and has the genealogy of the family. She says the Gurd House should be entitled "David desMarest Sr. House" for David junior inherited it from his father and that David Sr. lived in the house. She states that there was no other David Sr. house except some shanty which the family may have lived in while the real house was built. She also says the wing was built first. If this is so, and it seems most reasonable, the Gurd House is the real beginning of the Demarest family in New Jersey."

Reviewed 1936, by H.C. Forman.

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